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Beneath the Nimbus—The Hair of the Saints

From the beginning of civilization, man has placed importance on the appearance and symbolism of hair. The psychosocial significance and religious connotation of hair are well known. Hair has 2 perceived symbolic meanings in a spiritual context: shaven hair is a symbol of celibacy and chastity, while uncut hair is seen as withdrawal from worldly concerns and vanities. Religious tradition is a plentiful source of accounts of hopes and fears related to the human condition. These hopes and fears are reflected in Christian hagiography and iconography. While the former deals with the accounts of the saints' lives, the latter relates to the saints' depiction in art. Appreciation of religious art is deepened by a knowledge of what is depicted and why. Roman Catholic churches are replete with images of saints. Since saints are seldom labeled with their names, clues to their identity are given by their attributes, ie, by their appearance or what object they are holding. These attributes may be the instruments of martyrdom, representations of events in their lives, or symbols of their teachings.

Peculiarities relating to the hair of saints (**Table**) are facial hirsutism (St Wilgefortis); generalized hypertrichosis (St Onuphrius); long, disheveled hair (St Mary of Egypt); long, beautiful hair (St Mary Magdalene); the miracle of hair growth (St Agnes of Rome); and overnight whitening of hair (St Thomas More).¹ The role of hair during martyrdom is reflected by the accounts of St Perpetua, who asked for a pin to fasten her untidy hair in the hour of her martyrdom, lest she might seem to be mourning in her hour of triumph, and

St Margaret of Antioch, who was allegedly tortured while being suspended by her hair.

In studying the saints, the question arises, "Why saints?" Woodward² states, "A saint is always someone through whom we catch a glimpse of what God is like—and of what we are called to be." Ultimately, saints help us to believe in miracles and miraculous healings. Roman Catholic tradition has made saints protectors of various aspects of life who are invoked for particular reasons. The affiliation of a protector saint to a specific condition relates to the lives of the saints and their depiction in art; eg, St Bartholomew is invoked for skin diseases because images of his martyrdom depict him with his skin draped over his arm. Therefore, the saints whose attributes relate to the hair would seem suitable candidates for trichological issues.³ Finally, understanding how hair is used as a symbol in the lives of the saints reveals its spiritual connection; after all, it is our skin appendage that is closest to heaven.

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Table. Summary of Saints, Their Peculiarities, and the Symbolism of Their Hair

	Mary Magdalene	Perpetua	Agnes of Rome	Margaret of Antioch
Period	First century	Died 203	291-304	Died 305
Sanctity	Follower of Christ and the Apostles	Martyr	Martyr	Martyr
Account	New Testament (Luke)	Tertullian of Carthage	Jacobus de Voragine	Jacobus de Voragine
Attributes	Long, uncovered hair, ointment vase	In arena, usually together with Felicity	Lamb	Dragon, cross
Patronage	Hair stylists	Martyrs	Girls, betrothed women, virgins, rape victims, gardeners	Childbirth
Hair condition	Long, beautiful hair	Hair in martyrdom	Long hair	Hair as martyrdom
Symbolism	Female attractiveness	Dignity	Chastity	Martyrdom
	Onuphrius	Mary of Egypt	Wilgefortis	Thomas More
Period	320-400	344-421	Unknown, cult aroused in 14th century	1478-1535
Sanctity	Hermit	Hermit	Martyr	Martyr
Account	Paphnutius	Sophronius	Popular religious imagination	History of England
Attributes	Wild man completely covered with hair, loin girdle of leaves	Long hair covering naked body	Beard, crucifixion	Book, axe
Patronage	Weavers	Penitents	Difficult marriages	Statesmen and politicians
Hair condition	Generalized hypertrichosis	Long, disheveled hair	Facial hirsutism	Sudden whitening of hair
Symbolism	Withdrawal from worldly concerns and vanities	Withdrawal from worldly concerns and vanities	Resistance	Extreme psychological stress

1. Trüeb RM, Navarini AA. Thomas More syndrome. *Dermatology*. 2010;220(1):55-56.

2. Woodward K. *Making Saints: How the Catholic Church Determines Who Becomes a Saint, Who Doesn't, and Why*. New York, NY: Touchstone/Simon and Schuster; 1996.

3. Trüeb RMS. Agnes of Rome: patron saint for women with hair loss? *Dermatology*. 2009;219(2):97-98.